



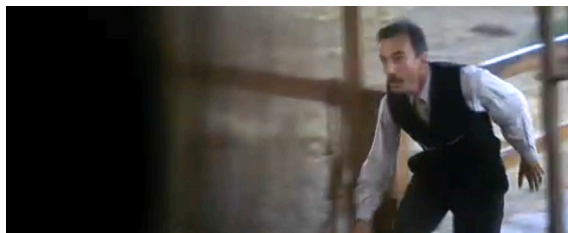
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The Father, the Son, and the Holy Drill: The Oil Rig Explosion in *There Will Be Blood*

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Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film *There Will Be Blood* functions as an allegory for the battle between capitalism and Christianity in America during the late 19th century. Oilman Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) embodies capitalism, and the local preacher, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), embodies religion. Although the film mainly focuses on the ongoing clash between the two men, the relationship between Plainview and his non-biological son, H.W., serves as a persistent foil to such a grandiose, allegorical contest, ultimately telling a more disturbing tale of dehumanization. The sequence in which the oil rig explodes, causing H.W. to lose his hearing, reveals the importance of the father-son storyline in the film, the egotism of Plainview's character, and the parallels between capitalism and religion.

The oil rig explosion sequence is long and immersive. Shots that Anderson could have condensed with editing are shown in real-time. As the oil bursts up from the ground and into the air, a hand-held camera follows the movement, running along with Plainview as he carries his son away from the blast and joining the workers as they hurry towards the well. Anderson immerses us in the



event so much that we feel the panic of the oilmen as gushing oil rains down on them, even splashing onto the camera lens. The raw camera movement and real-time pacing brings viewers into the action, inviting us to experience the chaos *with* the men rather than watching from a distance.



When Plainview runs up the stairs of the oil derrick to save H.W., the camera pans over the oil erupting into the air, briefly producing an entirely black screen. Anderson's choice to place the eruption between the action and the viewer demonstrates the way in which oil is always in the forefront of what-

ever happens in Plainview's life. It monopolizes the screen just as it does the story and, ultimately, the decisions Plainview makes regarding his relationship with his son. The music playing over this sequence starts off rhythmic and repetitive, sounding industrial, like metal pipes drumming on

metal. As Plainview carries H.W. to the mess room, the music grows quieter and somewhat distant, but it increasingly intensifies again as the scene progresses, reaching a pitch and rhythm that sounds like a churning locomotive mixed with sharp violin notes straight out of a horror movie. Jason Sperb describes Plainview as “a man focused on life’s materiality—the land, the tools, the hard physical labor, required for success” (196). The mechanical music reflects Plainview’s mood and mindset, both rooted in capitalist competition and the growth of his drilling business. While a suddenly gushing oil well might signify positively as a marker of Plainview’s hard-won success, scoring the sequence with an eerie, menacing soundtrack (and scripting it as the cause of H.W.’s injury) gives it sinister undertones that highlight the ways in which Plainview can neither foresee nor control the negative consequences of his relentless pursuit of material success.

As the sequence turns from afternoon to evening, we see a silhouette shot of Plainview standing in front of the eruption’s aftermath. It tracks diagonally as his body passes in front of the oil rig and the two swap places. Plainview is once again shown crossing paths with the oil, indicating a transitional moment in the story, with the rig both literally and figuratively at the center. A few shots later, the men are shot as silhouettes in front of the burning rig while the screen is bordered with an orange aura. As with the music, the manipulation of light and color allows the audience the same perspective as the characters. We view the scene through a narrow, burning lens. Anderson

then cuts to an extreme long shot of the vacant landscape where the fire is the only light in the darkness, reminding the viewer of its significance to the story. The flaming rig takes on a god-like signification, indicated through the orange halo wrapped around the screen and the mesmerized expression on the characters’ faces as they gaze upon the oil fire in awe.

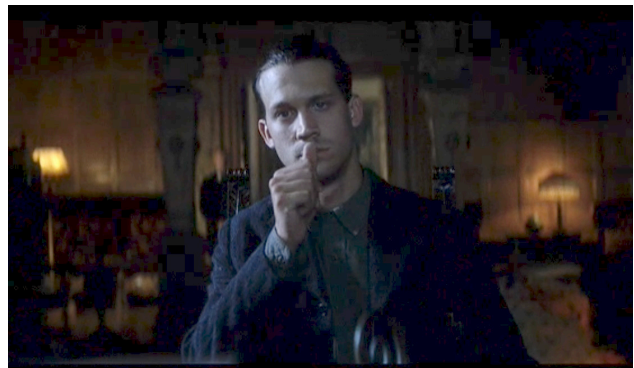


Plainview’s exultation at his success is contrasted to every other element in the scene, such as the off-putting music and overall devastation of the surrounding area. As the flames continue to radiate, he looks to one of his men, Fletcher, and says, “What are you looking so miserable about? There’s a whole ocean of oil under our feet! No one can get at it except for me.” And when asked if H.W. is okay, he responds with a simple, “no, he isn’t.” As he gazes at the flames, the camera slowly zooms in on his oil-covered face. He relishes his new financial success while dismissing its devastating consequences. The sequence thus marks a turning point in the narrative. Events that signify great prosperity in Plainview’s professional life will, hereafter, simultaneously mark great misfortune in his personal life. Plainview becomes a greedy monster willing to sacrifice the well-being of his loved ones to oil and the wealth it brings.

Yet, if the film is an allegory for the battle between capitalism and religion, as critics have suggested, then why does it also focus so heavily on Plainview’s relationship with his son, H.W.? Why is the father-son dynamic so prominent in an otherwise straightforward story about a greedy oilman and his contest with a local pastor who becomes a powerful evangelist? Perhaps the purpose of the father-son focus is to put Plainview’s humanity to the ultimate test. Anyone attempting to

thrive in the business world must presumably have a business mindset, and someone without a family is less likely to be criticized for a singular focus on profit. That is, the audience may not blame Plainview for his capitalist ambitions if an innocent child did not bear the consequences of it. If the film solely displayed the fraught relationship between money and church in America through a sole focus on Daniel Plainview's and Eli Sunday's feud, their loss of humanity would not be as prominent. Sperb points out that H.W. is "a prop for Plainview, who is selling himself as a family man running a family business" (196)—a "prop" that is disposable once it becomes more of a burden than an asset. The family dynamic introduces a standard that Plainview fails to meet. People tend to put their children above all else, including themselves. Plainview, however, basks in his economic triumph in a situation that would normally elicit a selfless, compassionate response from a loving parent. Although he feels the basic need to protect his son and assume the role of caretaker, he is less likely to be a worthy father in our eyes because he cannot prioritize H.W. over his own success in business.

A sequence near the end of the film—in which H.W. expresses his plans for drilling his own oil in Mexico—confirms Plainview's belief that their relationship is nothing more than transactional. His immediate reaction to his son's plan is, "This makes you my competitor," and he cruelly forces his deaf son to speak aloud instead of signing with his hands. Plainview highlights H.W.'s disability, which he views as a weakness, in order to widen the gap between them and place himself on superior ground. For this sequence, Plainview is shot in front of a blue background, symbolizing his cold apathy towards his son, and H.W. is positioned between two warm, yellow lights that signify his compassionate and loving approach to the conversation. Plainview's aggravation escalates until he finally admits to H.W. that he was an orphan. Taking it a few steps further, he adds, "I don't even know who you are because you have none of me in you. You're someone else's... You're just a bastard from a basket." As H.W. walks out of the office, Daniel continues to taunt him, but because H.W. is deaf, the shouted insults go unheard. This suggests that Daniel's behavior has little to do with his son's perception of him and more to do with his own personal rejection of what H.W. represents: family. If Plainview had genuinely cared for H.W. regardless of financial gain, he probably wouldn't have ended up alone and an alcoholic. Instead, he views family as pointless unless profitable and cannot give the unconditional love that coincides with it. This sequence squashes any hope the viewer had for Plainview to prove himself as a functioning father because he can only understand relationships—even his relationship to the boy he raised—in terms of competition.



The final sequences of the film reinforce the idea that Plainview ends up alone not by chance, but as the result of his own narcissistic choices. He was “always determined to be completely alone—obliterating all competition...and killing senselessly if the occasion presented itself” (Sperb, 229). Plainview’s rejection of H.W. as his son is followed by the final scene of the film in which he murders Eli Sunday with a bowling pin. H.W. and Eli Sunday represent two intangible aspects of life, love and faith, both of which are threatening to Daniel because he cannot prove himself to be victorious over them. Desperate to preserve his superiority, he attempts to erase them entirely. Nurturing a father-son relationship or subscribing to a faith (or at the very least respecting someone else’s) would require selflessness and sacrifice, making them worthless in his single-minded pursuit of individual prosperity.

The battle between capitalism and religion is a major theme in *There Will Be Blood*, but perhaps only on the surface. It is not until we consider other elements of the story, such the rejection of love, regression of healthy competition into barbaric, juvenile behavior, and the apathetic treatment towards others (including family members), that a deeper, more disturbing message appears. Any person can be corrupt regardless of the group or era to which they belong, and a singular focus on material ambition reveals more than the presumed worth of achieving such ambitions. The oil explosion sequence is the beginning of Plainview’s moral corruption. The breakthrough in his career features a chaotic, burning mess that physically disables his son, yet he gazes longingly upon it as if it were divine. Despite his mockery of Eli Sunday’s religious beliefs, Plainview’s idolization of the oil and Anderson’s choice to frame the scene as a spiritual experience suggest that capitalism is neither better nor worse than Christianity; rather, it is just a different form of religion. The matter of what Plainview and Sunday believe in, whether profit or Prophet, is irrelevant. How they pursue that belief and how far they are willing to go to reach sublimity is what eventually dehumanizes both of them in the end. ☹

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